Prevention of Violent Extremism Caused by Religious Intolerance

Topic Background

Violent extremism caused by religious intolerance has become common again recently. History books point to old wars of religion, religious persecution and religious crimes, but now we are seeing a revival in recent tensions. The most commonly referenced religious violence in the United States are extremists claiming to commit acts of terrorism in the name of Islam; but the world also sees significant power struggles between Sunni and Shia Muslims (Islamic sects), and the persecution of religious minorities around the world.¹

Religious intolerance is significant given that “84% of the world’s population identifies with a religious group.”² The four largest religious groups are Christians (31%), Muslims (24%), Hindus (15%) and Buddhists (7%). This means 5.7 billion of the 7.3 billion people on Earth believe in one of the four listed religions above. The other large categories are folk or traditional religions: Sikhism, Baha’i, and Jainism. Judaism comes in at about 0.2% of the global population, but it is primarily concentrated in the United States and Israel. The last large category at 16% are those with no religious affiliation, meaning they do not practice an organized religion even if they have some spiritual beliefs.

Pew Research Center found that over a quarter of the countries in the world had “government restrictions on religion, including limits on proselytizing and public preaching, or detentions and assaults of religious group members.”³ Even further, more on the level of individual people, a quarter of the countries surveyed experienced “social hostilities involving religion, including tensions between religious groups and religion-related terrorism.”⁴

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⁴ Jonas Baumann, Daniel Finnbogason, and Isak Svensson, “Rethinking Mediation: Resolving Religious Conflicts,”
These two ideas are the types of religious violence the world is seeing now. One coming from government-imposed restrictions on religion and a person’s ability to practice their religion. The other is primarily seen in extremist and terrorist organizations who claim religion as the cause for their violent actions, but most followers of that religion denounce the actions of the extremists.

One of the current attacks on a religious group is the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar. The Rohingya people, primarily living in the Rakhine province, are a Muslim minority in the Buddhist majority Myanmar. The government of Myanmar does not recognize the Rohingya Muslims as citizens, and instead illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh. Myanmar security forces falsely claim they are fighting Rohingya militants and not civilians. Over one million refugees have fled their homes in favor of makeshift camps and settlements. This example of persecution of religious minorities is not the only example in the world, and others are out there similarly terrifying.

The other primary religious extremism comes from terrorist organizations that commit crimes in the name of a religion. One of the largest in recent years is Daesh, also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Daesh is a militant organization that took over large swaths of Iraq and Syria in the name of a radical interpretation of Islam. The group claims to be committing heinous acts in the name of a global ‘jihad,’ which the group perverted to mean the killing of all those who do not believe as they do. In 2014, the group declared itself the “Islamic State,” in which it claims to speak for all Muslims around the world. This concept was met with significant global opposition and Daesh as a state has not recognized by any actual state in the world.

One tactic used by religious extremists in the modern age is online recruitment, which has been used particularly effectively by Daesh. The group targets individuals who are normally young Muslims living in Western countries that feel marginalized by their governments or society. Recurring themes in the social media campaigns are grievances against the government and jihad as a rightful way to resolve the perceived injustices. Social media campaigns can reach millions of people, have higher success rates than other methods, and are difficult to track and shut down. This is a major concern regarding not only Daesh and other terrorist organizations, but any extremist group, religious or otherwise, that may be trying to recruit individuals online.

https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/PP6-1.pdf
7 Robyn Torok, “ISIS and the Institution of Online Terrorist Recruitment,” Middle East Institute, https://www.mei.edu/publications/isis-and-institution-online-terrorist-recruitment
Religious extremist organizations continue to be a problem the world faces. It is no longer just preventing people from crossing borders and causing harm. It is also a concern for recruitment that happens remotely, where individuals are radicalized online and then carry out attacks, most often against their own governments or people. To prevent these atrocities from taking place, decisive action needs to be taken.

**Past Actions**

The United Nations Development Programme has been leading the charge on establishing methods to counter violent extremism of all kinds. In December 2015, a report of the Secretary-General was published to solidify the “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.” It highlighted the impact, causes, and processes of radicalization, as well as actionable items on how to counter this rise.

Over the decades, with the rise of religious terrorist organizations, coalitions of states have arisen to fight the violent extremists. The United Nations Security Council has named multiple organizations as terrorist organizations, including the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and Daesh. This allows states the international backing to fight such organizations both domestically and abroad. Major offensives against these groups have been ongoing throughout Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and other states affected by these terrorist organizations.

As outlined in the Secretary-General’s report, there are major actions that states and the international community can take to prevent violent extremism caused by religious intolerance. In particular, the conditions that create the context for radicalization need to be addressed; these are: lack of socioeconomic opportunities, marginalization and discrimination, poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law, prolonged and unresolved conflicts, and radicalization in prisons. These areas are key to understanding how people can be so influenced by recruitment tactics of current extremists.

The report also identified key parts of the process of radicalization. These are broad areas to consider when looking at what governments should try to counter in extremists. It focuses on individual backgrounds and motivations, collective grievances and victimization, distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies and ethnic and cultural differences, and the leadership and social networks of extremist organizations. By knowing the factors of how someone may become radicalized, this can be prevented from the beginning.

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The primary Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) this topic would fall under is SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. The impact of violent extremism creates instability around the world, and in particular the regions the extremist groups are based. The Secretary-General’s report highlights Goals 1, 4, 5, 8, 10 and 11 as being key drivers of ensuring that national policies align with the SDGs in an effort to prevent radicalization. While all other SDGs play into the origins and base of religious radicalization, SDG 16 shows the final result and impact of not having peace, justice, or strong institutions.

A significant number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) take a part to prevent violent extremism. Minority Rights Group International focuses on supporting minority and indigenous peoples around the world to maintain their language, culture, and land upon which they live.\textsuperscript{10} This informs governments and others in the society to ensure that individuals feel included and wanted. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both investigate and report on human rights abuses, lobby governments, and work to educate people on potential ways to support others subjected to human rights abuses. The Universal Rights Group is a human rights think tank that works on creating policies and measures to ensure people are protected globally.\textsuperscript{11} All of these organizations, NGOs and think tanks have produced countless reports and records about human rights abuses and concerns around the world that directly contribute to the violent extremism caused by religious intolerance.

**Possible Solutions**
While actions have been taken on how to identify the problems at hand, there is still room to improve on the methods of actually countering these rises of extremists. The United Nations gives suggestions to states on how they should carry out the actions, but it would be possible for the UN to coordinate actions or share best practices with their efforts on preventing violent extremism.

With the areas of study listed above in the Secretary-General’s report, this is a place where the international community can take action against extremist organizations given these specific methods.

One of the biggest questions is how to stop the governments from repressing its own citizens. This crosses lines between mere suggestions that the UN can make and issues of national sovereignty. This is a contentious issue between national governments being able to govern themselves effectively and protecting their own people.


\textsuperscript{11} “Does the UN already have the tools to prevent violent extremism? The newly discovered role of social exclusion and discrimination in violent extremism,” Universal Rights Group, \url{https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Peoples-under-Threat-briefing-2018.pdf}.
The next area is how to address the current extremist groups that already exist and are causing havoc around the world. There is little room for error in preventing these groups from committing heinous crimes, and it would be up to the international community to determine how best to address the problems of these groups’ very existence.

Another question is how to prevent extremist groups from recruiting new members in the first place, and how to avoid the growth of these organizations. However they wish to gain new members, it is a key issue in preventing future attacks and crimes, both domestically and internationally to each state.

Each state is impacted differently by religious extremism, and depending on how the state has been affected in the past will impact its perspective on the issue. States with significantly more extremists may be more likely to take harsh actions against them, and states without many extremists are more able to take on preventative measures and assist other states. Delegates must weigh questions of peace, justice, liberty, security, and how to balance each of these issues as they tackle the very difficult question of preventing violent extremism caused by religious intolerance.

Further Research
- United Nations Development Programme on Preventing Violent Extremism
- Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism

Worksheet Questions
1. What are the two most common religions in the world?
2. What is one terrorist organization that claims it acts on behalf of religion?
3. What is the process called where an individual begins to believe and act on the beliefs of violent extremists?
4. What is an NGO that actively works to monitor the status of individual rights around the world?
5. Name a country that has been impacted by an attack from an extremist organization.